3

Types of Labels in Exhibitions

Every label in an exhibition has a specific purpose that needs to make sense within the organization of the whole, but given the way visitors encounter them out of order, they also need to function independently.

There is no universal terminology in museums to identify types of labels. Some institutions use function (e.g., orientation, introductory, caption); others use placement (e.g., wall text, case label, free-standing); some have in-house colloquial expressions (chat panels, tombstone labels); and others haven't thought about labels enough to develop an in-house style vocabulary or standards. Regardless of the names they are given, labels should be developed as an integrated system, from the single title, to the broadest categories, to the one-of-a-kinds. They should all work together.

The most important types of interpretive labels in any exhibition are the title, introduction, section labels, group labels, and captions. These labels help to organize the information and present the exhibition's rationale for looking like it does. Although these labels are developed as linear and hierarchical information, they may not be used in the "right" order by visitors. Nevertheless, the labels still should have internal integrity, organization, and a clear logic to the design.

Noninterpretive labels include identification labels (ID labels), donor plaques, wayfinding and regulatory signs, and credit panels. They will be discussed briefly at the end of this chapter. Labels for interactive exhibits, which

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have special requirements, will be addressed in chapter 15. Here we offer a general classification of basic interpretive labels, and expand on the special role of captions.

TYPES OF INTERPRETIVE LABELS

Title labels identify the name of the exhibition. The best titles will arouse interest and curiosity and give enough information to enable visitors to decide whether they are interested enough in the subject matter to enter.

Large title labels placed high overhead (i.e., more than eight feet from the ground) may be missed by visitors and will need to be repeated somewhere in their line of sight.

There should only be one title, and it should be used consistently throughout the museum—the same name on the floor plan, in the guidebook, on the exhibit itself, and in the press release.

Introductory or orientation labels set up the organization and tone of the exhibition. A large, simple floor plan and a summary statement will help to

FIGURE 3.1
The Huntington Library welcomes visitors with a simple and beautiful title panel that includes the exhibition's four sections.

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FIGURE 3.2
The exhibit title on the glass door at the Asian Art Museum helps orient visitors by letting them know there are four galleries and that it's okay to take photos.

prepare visitors for the size, sections, and themes of the space, even if it is a small exhibition, and especially if it is large.

Quick, clear orientation is a very important feature for visitors, but many people will not stop to read a long introduction because they are being drawn into the exhibit by many competing and enticing sights, objects, and sounds. If the entryway is crowded, visitors will not want to stop and block traffic flow into the exhibition.

Dense introductory text with many thoughts all crammed into one paragraph is not inviting or easy to read. For all these reasons, keep orientation information short and the print large so that visitors can glance-and-get-it without stopping.

Even though visitors are more likely to read gallery introductions in art museums, especially in special or temporary exhibitions, after the Detroit Institute of Arts' renovations and reinstallation of their permanent collection, they found that less than one in ten visitors read a section or gallery panel.

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FIGURE 3.3
This section label at the Detroit Institute of Arts is broken into three paragraphs of about 50 words each, with plenty of line spacing. Introductory and section labels need to be easy to read from a distance.

Recommendations from their summative evaluation included this: Decrease the word limit for introductory panels from 150 to 50, and increase the size of the type to allow reading from a distance and at a glance.[1] Visitor research studies have shown that visitors who understand the organization of the exhibition and use it in the intended sequence (if there is one) spend more time and get more out of it.[2]

The prominence and importance of an introductory label may make it difficult to get the exhibit team to agree on it. As one label writer put it, "I can write three dozen captions and nobody will take any interest in them. But as soon as I write the introductory label, everybody from the director to the janitor wants to fiddle with the wording."

Section labels introduce themes or areas within an exhibition. These important clues to the arrangement of the content are often missed or skipped

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by visitors if they only contain words, because visitors' attention is being drawn to the objects instead. Adding visuals and even mounting objects to section panels can create more interest in them. Placing them in the line of sight and keeping them short help, too.

In the exhibition *Darkened Waters: Profile of an Oil Spill*, many of the section labels were very brief, and the content was almost the same as the communication goals for those sections. This unity of concept and design provided a very clear and strong continuity of messages. For example:

Section Labels	*Communication Goals*
Recipe for a Disaster	There were multiple reasons for it
We Couldn't Clean It Up	We couldn't clean it all up
Oil and Animals Don't Mix	It was a huge disaster

Group labels inform visitors of the rationale behind a smaller subgrouping of objects, paintings, or animals. "Why are these things shown together?" is a common question in the backs of visitors' minds, and it needs to be answered to help visitors feel comfortable, competent, and in control of their own experience. Even if there is little cohesiveness in the groupings, inform visitors of that, so they will not wonder if they are missing something. Do not make area or group labels so long (that is, wordy) that people will want to skip them.

Group labels are also called "focus labels" and "chat panels" because they often contain more content than a title or subtitle and are more general than captions.

Captions are specific labels for specific objects (e.g., artifacts, photos, and phenomena), and they are commonly used in all types of museum exhibitions. Captions are the "frontline" form of interpretive labels because many visitors wander around in exhibits without attending to the linear or hierarchical organization of information (title, introduction, section label) until they see something interesting. If visitors stop only when something catches their attention, the information in caption labels must make sense independently—as well as work harmoniously with all the other labels.

Sometimes the only labels visitors will read are captions, because captions are usually short and placed right next to an object. They should refer to the visible specifics—beyond just the obvious—of the objects they discuss. If they are abstract or can be read alone without any reference to the object, they

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FIGURE 3.4
When it's not possible to have labels with the objects, numbers key them to their identification information. A three-part label organizes captions for a group of jade pendants, enticing visitors to look more closely.

are not doing their job. Labels that support the caption information, such as subgroup or area labels, should be close by, so that visitors can start with the specific caption or ID, then jump to the broader context, and vice versa.

GUIDELINES FOR CAPTIONS

Below are some specific guidelines that will help make museum captions work effectively. Many of them are discussed at greater length in other chapters as well:

- Start with visual, concrete information—what visitors can see. Work from the specific to the general, not the other way around.
- Make the vocabulary appropriate for a broad range of ages. (Chapter 6 on reading levels will explain how.)
- Do not cram several ideas into one paragraph. Divide up the sentences into logical chunks.
- Keep the paragraphs short.
- Use bullets to make lists easier to read.

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- Do not try to make generalizations in captions based on a single object or example. Keep information specific to what visitors are experiencing firsthand.
- Vary the length (number of words), depending on the intrinsic value of the object being captioned. Objects likely to be of more interest (e.g., biggest, most famous) to the majority of the visitors or that support the big idea best deserve longer captions. Do not make labels all the same length.
- Make captions short enough so that most visitors, if they choose to read, will be able to read the whole label. Five words per second is an average museum reading speed. Write most of the labels so that they can be read quickly—ten seconds or less, or about fifty words or less.
- Make caption type large enough for readers' range of visual acuity. Your audience includes senior citizens and children, regardless of the type of institution. A minimum of 20-point type is strongly recommended.
- Position captions so they are visible and legible to people in wheelchairs.
- Position captions so they are well lighted and shadows don't fall on them.
- If an object has been removed and the caption is still there, it is a thoughtful gesture to put up a photograph of the piece that is missing. It would add interpretation to also say why; for example, for loan or conservation purposes.

The following is an example of a caption that contains several of the above-mentioned characteristics, from an art exhibition about symbolism:

> Rain Mask with Reptiles, Figures, and Bats
>
> This powerful object was actually a mask used in a rain-petitioning dance at the Santa Anita settlement in the state of Guerrero, Mexico. It includes several symbols for water and rain:
>
> - blue eyes, the color of water
> - twisting, flowing serpents
> - a vampire bat's head at the top of the mask, included because bats live in caves, believed to be the home of the rain gods
>
> Another meaning of the mask relates to the notion of transformation and power. Lizards (as halfsnake, half-legged animals) were said to be able to whisper secrets to the wearer. By wearing the mask, an individual was transformed into a godlike being with both animal attributes and the power to commune with and control nature.

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FIGURE 3.5
Extended interpretive labels placed at a distance from a large artwork can hold more chunks of text. Visitors at the Detroit Institute of Arts can read and look without doing the dance of squint, back up, squint, back up.

This "Rain Mask" caption contains numerous references to concrete, visual aspects of the object, and encourages visitors to look for details and think about how it might feel to wear the mask. The final paragraph of "Rain Mask" has fifty-six words. Does it look too long to you? At least it is telling a story, not just a list of unrelated facts.

Captions for interactive exhibits follow the same guidelines as above, but the placement and ordering of information are even more important. Text that deals with interpretation should have a different design—be in a different font, size, or color—than words that give directions. And directions need to be placed where people's hands and eyes naturally go. (See chapter 15 for more about labels for interactive exhibits.)

Outdoor wayside panels are captions; they caption the landscape. They usually don't have a lot of competition, being few and far between along a trail or a road or over a vista. But they have to provide context, since there

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FIGURE 3.6
Visitors to a trail in Nevada's Great Basin can carry caption labels with them on paper or on their smartphones.

are usually no supporting labels nearby. The same rules for captions apply here. Waysides should address what visitors can see, directing attention to a physical characteristic or a place. Although the need to provide context might make them longer than typical caption labels, the text should be chunked out into easily readable bits and contain supporting visuals.

NONINTERPRETIVE TYPES OF LABELS

Identification labels contain minimal short details, such as name, maker, date, material, scientific name, and accession number. They are not interpretive, although they are often combined with interpretation or captions.

Several formats for ID labels are commonly used. The examples below show different arrangements of information and typography:

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The Abduction of the Sabine Women
Painted in Naples, about 1640
Johann Heinrich Schonfeld
Oil on canvas

PIER FRANCESCO
Italian, 1612–1666
Vision of Saint Bruno 1660–1666
Oil on canvas 89.PA.4

PORCELLANIDAE
Petrolisthes maculatus
Anemone Porcelain Crab

DROMEDARY CAMEL
Camelus dromedarius
NORTH AFRICA AND ARABIA
Donated by Hall Foundation

In most cases, what is most important to visitors is what it is—its title and its common name, identifiers that they can relate to. The first sample shows the most sensitivity to the visitors' interests, vocabulary, and priorities. In the second, an unfamiliar artist's name and three sets of numbers present a jumble of details for visitors to sort through. In the third sample, few visitors would even know that the first line was the animal's taxonomic family name and the second its scientific Latin binomial; the typography and order are in the wrong priority for most visitors. The fourth is functional but somewhat boring.

Identification labels, as long as they are legible, are usually easy for visitors to decode, once a person has seen one or two. While consistency of ID information formats is important within each exhibition, format can vary between exhibitions. Different types of objects, artifacts, or animals might suggest or require a different ordering of information.

Donor information is typically provided last and in the smallest type. These taglines ("donated by . . ." "gift of . . . ") are not interpretive, and they should not be larger than or mixed in with captions, IDs, or other interpretive labels. Labels that acknowledge funders are best dealt with in their own space, near the end of the exhibition, in a discrete, respectful way. Materials,

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typefaces, and sizes should be sophisticated but not out of character with the rest of the signage. Expensive bronze donor or funder plaques next to dog-eared, paper interpretive labels indicate that visitors' interests are not being considered first. Donor and funder names mixed into titles are ostentatious and confusing, such as "The Webber Hall of Mammals." Exhibit designer Paul Orselli has collected examples of creative donor recognition installations in his blog post "Many Ways to Say Thanks."[3]

Credit panels recognize the contributions and efforts of all the people who worked on the exhibition. A credit panel does not have to be in bronze, nor does it have to be big, but somewhere, credit should be given. Visitors should see the many people and different skills it takes to make a good show. Credit panels are also good for staff morale, as well as for reference and accountability.

Wayfinding and orientation signs help visitors find their way around the museum and orient themselves in each new space (such as when they walk in the front door or get off the elevator at an upper floor). These signs are technically not interpretive labels, but the role that orientation and wayfinding signs

FIGURE 3.7
The orientation map at Brookfield Zoo lets you know the flow of the indoor trail, the big idea, some of the critters you'll see, and how long it will take.

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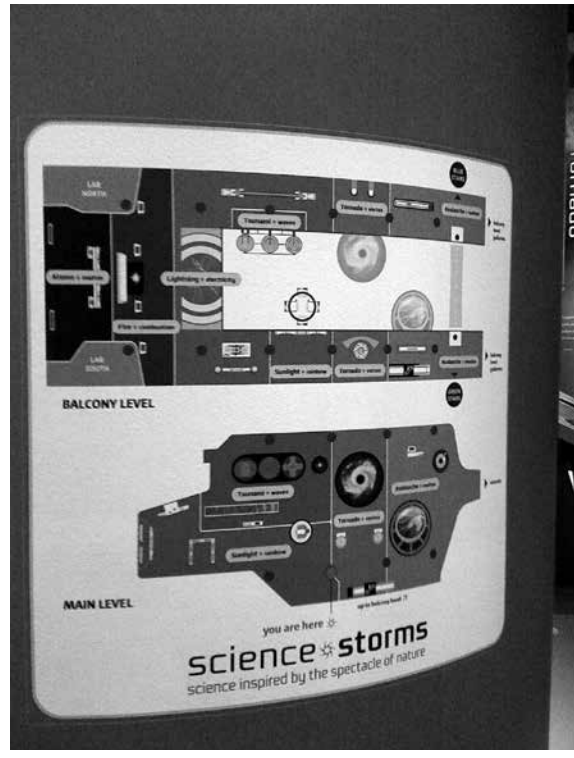

FIGURE 3.8
Floor plans are important not just for wayfinding in large, complex spaces, such as the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. They also provide an overview of the exhibition, name the themes, and designate the boundaries.

play in satisfying visitors' need to know where they are—and the importance that need has in making people ready and receptive for learning—should not be overlooked or underestimated. Visitors cannot be ready to receive interpretation if they feel lost. A secure and comfortable knowledge of present location—and the subsequent relative locations of exits, bathrooms, or food—are basic to allowing visitors to feel readiness for higher-level human needs that deal with social, creative, or intellectual aspects.

Regulatory signs tell us not to touch the art or not to feed the animals. With a little creativity, prohibitive signs can be made friendly, funny, and positive, not threatening.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF LABELS IN ONE EXHIBITION

The number of different types of labels used in any one exhibition will be driven by communication goals, size, budget, and other factors, but it is prob-

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ably a good idea to limit the types of interpretive labels to fewer than ten. More than that and the exhibition design will begin to look cluttered and disorganized, and visitors will have a hard time figuring out what the "system" is and how to follow it. Labels on every available surface—rails, kiosks, walls, stanchions, and glass, and mounted so that they flip, turn, flow around and over graphics—plus electronic labels scrolling, projected, and pixilated are too much in one exhibition!

LABEL LENGTHS

All types of labels should be kept as brief as possible. Titles are usually fewer than ten words. Orientation, introductory, and section labels, which are typically too long—over three hundred words—should be edited down and broken into shorter paragraphs (twenty to thirty words each). Longer introductory labels may be necessary if that is the only type of interpretive label in the exhibition, as might be the case in an art museum. Simple captions (one or two sentences) or extended captions (short paragraphs, plus illustrations) should be visually oriented, concrete, and interrelated.

The next chart reviews typical label lengths and types, but bear in mind that the question, "How many words should there be in a label?" is better asked as, "How many words does this label need to have?" And remember: Stick to the point or ideas that support the big idea best. For more about the recommended number of words in different types of labels, see chapter 7.

Main Types of Interpretive Labels	*Purpose*	*Number of Words*
Exhibition Titles	to attract attention to inform about the theme to identify	1–7
Introductory Labels	to introduce the big idea to orientate visitors to the space	20–125
Group Labels	to interpret a specific group of objects to introduce a subtheme or section	20–75
Caption Labels	to interpret individual objects, models, phenomena	20–75

EXAMPLES OF INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEMS

Some museums develop institutionwide labeling systems that identify the type and purpose of the various labels used in the galleries. These not only

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ensure consistent presentation of information to visitors, but having such a system also helps the museum communicate clearly. Museums may use different terminology for the types of labels they use, but, as seen from the examples below, they are more similar than they are different.

Victoria & Albert Museum[4]

- Introduction
- Section panel
- Theme panel
- Subtheme label
- Standard label
- Group label

Oakland Museum of California, Art Gallery[5]

- A labels address the major theme section of the gallery
- B labels address a miniexhibition within the gallery
- C labels address subgrouping within a miniexhibition
- D labels are extended object labels written by the artist Jaime Cortez
- E labels are extended object labels written by OMCA staff

The Getty Museum of Art[6]

- Branding title
- Exhibition title/gallery name
- Introductory statement
- Section, focus, diagrammatic texts
- Object label

The Liberty Science Center has a set of guidelines that incorporates all kinds of signage, not just the exhibition labels.[7]

- Title/zone overview
- Environmental graphics
- Directional signage
- Donor credit signs
- Content interpretive panels or labels

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- Instructional signs
- Artifact labels
- Reader rails
- Fast facts
- Updates
- Media interactive
- Flip books

"RANDOM ACCESS" TO THE TYPES OF LABELS

To test the idea that labels are able to stand alone, or can be read out of order, take all the labels of a certain type (e.g., all the captions, all the section labels) and scramble them up. Pull one out. If this is the first label that a person reads in the exhibition, will it serve as a good entry point? Select a set of three or four at random out of the pile and read them. Do they make sense in that mixed-up order? If you read only one-fifth of the labels, will they still convey the big idea? If labels can pass this test, they will serve visitors well in the random, out-of-sequence, incomplete way that people typically move through an exhibition.

BEYOND LABELS

More lengthy exhibit interpretation can and should be presented in formats other than labels. Besides inexpensive single-page handouts, newsprint, or brochures that visitors can use in the museum or take home, there can be books or the catalog to browse through (tables and chairs provided), laminated portable labels to carry around the gallery and put back, and catalogs for purchase. Videos, audio tours, iPads, computer databases, websites, and demonstrations by staff can provide other means and modes of presenting interpretation and activities. All of these supplementary forms of interpretation will allow interpretive labels to remain brief, as they should be.

Good exhibitions will skillfully combine several different types of labels, using them in a consistent manner. They need not conform to the exact types described here, but whatever form they take, each type of label should have a recognizable function that is clear to visitors. Size, typeface, color, graphic design, length, placement, and content will all be cues for what the label's purpose is. Multiple cues should be used to ensure that visitors easily follow the logic of the exhibition designers' intent and messages.

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The exhibition's big idea, the way the stories are told, and the system of types of labels, all must take into account the needs, motivations, interests, and knowledge level of the people who come to visit. The next section will discuss popular notions of learning styles, levels of information, label vocabulary and style, and ways to reach audiences of diverse backgrounds.

NOTES

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2. There are multiple references in Valerie Crane, et al. *Informal Science Learning: What the Research Says about Television, Science, Museums, and Community-Based Projects* (Dedham, MA: Research Communications Ltd., 1994). See Stephen Bitgood, ed., "Special Issue: Orientation and Circulation," *Visitor Behavior* 1, no. 4 (January 1987).

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7. Ann Neumann, "Liberty Science Center Graphic Standards" (unpublished document, Liberty Science Center, 2005). They will share this, and you might get an updated version.

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